

Delivery Robots in Washington, DC

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September 2018

Not long ago, many were looking to drones as the future for food and package deliveries. These days, that prospect appears to have cooled off a bit. The FAA has moved forward with a pilot program for the commercial use of drones, but the broader use and regulations for drones is complicated, to say the least. The District of Columbia and the DC metropolitan area have quite strict restrictions on the use of drones. But, the District is proving itself a city on the forefront of global efforts to test and adopt the use of unmanned robots for these same sorts of food and package deliveries.

DC's Pilot Program for Self-Driving Delivery Robots

The DC Council approved a pilot program for delivery robots in 2016. The program allowed for the use and testing of 5 wheeled robots fitted with coolers to roam about approved areas of the city in order to deliver food ordered by customers through the mobile phone apps for Postmates and DoorDash.¹ This past spring, new legislation was passed by the Council to make the program permanent, allow for more robots, and lifts certain restrictions, such as where in the city these robots can operate.²

Starship Enterprises & the Success of Robot Deliveries in DC

The company behind the technology that produces and operates the robots is called Starship Enterprises. The company describes their product as 'The Self-Driving Delivery Robot'.³ These robots can carry items 'from stores or specialized hubs' within a 2-mile radius.⁴ Deliveries can be monitored through smartphone apps while safely navigating around objects and people.⁵ The 'cargo bay is locked throughout the journey and can be opened only by the recipient'.⁶

DC serves as the North American operations center for Starship. And, now with the Council's go ahead, the company plans to double in size from 40 to about 80 employees. At least initially, they envision an expansion of their service from the delivery of prepared foods to serving District communities through selected "hub grocery stores", according to Starship's US Head of Public Affairs, David Catania.⁷

This approach is likened to a 'campus model', much like the way Starship has used these robots to serve companies and their corporate campuses, as in the case of Intuit in Mountain View, CA. But, Mr. Catania has also noted other examples, including how the company 'worked with Johns Hopkins Medicine at Sibley Memorial Hospital to deliver medical supplies to recently discharged patients'.⁸

¹ Sidman, Jessica. More Delivery Robots Are Coming to DC. *Washingtonian*. May 11, 2018. Available at: <https://www.washingtonian.com/2018/05/11/more-delivery-robots-are-coming-to-dc/>. Accessed on September 30, 2018.

² *Ibid.*

³ Starship Enterprises Website. Business Section. Available at: <https://www.starship.xyz/business/>. Accessed on September 30, 2018.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Sidman. *op. cit.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

Global Impact of DC's Program and Legislation

Mr. Catania, who also previously served as a CD councilmember, has drawn attention to how the 2016 DC legislation has played an important role in influencing similar legislation globally. He explained that “[t]he Estonian government incorporated a good portion of what was in the District statute. [And], we have six state laws that have been passed since February of last year, and a seventh that’s sitting on the governor’s desk in Arizona, that all have their genesis in this District statute.”

Delivery Robots in Action

Washingtonian magazine has included a link to a short video of the delivery robot in the article referenced herein. This video can also be accessed directly on their YouTube channel here:

<https://youtu.be/EPuSEQV04Uo>

For a bit more detail and related interviews regarding the experience, the Wall Street Journal provided some early detail on the efforts back in 2017 in a separate video available on their own website here:

<http://www.wsj.com/video/food-delivery-robots-rolling-in-dc/302B33EA-06B2-4E51-B992-03D2CB752FC5.html>